

UNREQUITED AGONY OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF AMRITA PRITAM

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***Abstract:** In this paper, an endeavor is made to study women's tale with a view to understand their status and condition; and appreciate their trials and tribulations. Amrita Pritam in her short stories presents the status, and the condition of women who undergo exploitation and injustice as silent sufferers. The images of women present in the stories bring to the front the social, cultural, economic and psychological predicament of women in the Indian society. The entire writing of Amrita Pritam deals with woman's role and position in Indian society and this paper emphasizes the images of conventional women who underwent sufferings, prangs, during partition.*

***Keywords:** trials and tribulations, exploitation and injustice, social, cultural, economic and psychological predicament*

One of the most distinct voices in contemporary Indian literature Amrita Pritam was the first woman to receive the Shakitya Academy Award for her poetry in 1955. Being a prolific writer and a versatile genius, she also received the highest literary prize Bharatiya Jnanapeeth award in 1981. Her poems, novels, short stories, prose writings and autobiographies have been translated from Punjabi into Hindi and more than thirty regional and foreign languages. As a writer she held a unique position because of her foray into both lovely and harsh visionary world which is a reflection on the patriarchal social constrains. Amrita has published over 80 books including novels, poems, fiction and short stories. Her writing is celebrated for its sensuous imagery and evocative rhythm and is widely read and appreciated, though it has been criticized as vacuous and sentimental. Amrita Pritam was not only a talented writer, but also a fearless writer who did not mince her words to condemn oppression. Besides, her keen insight into human nature and her emotionally charged style of writing makes the reader live the agony or the ecstasy she portrays. Amrita Pritam is equally at home at shorter fiction and has written over eighty short stories which are collected in five volumes: Heer Di Kani, Latia Di Chokri, Panj Ware Lami Sadak, Ik Sahir Di Maut and Teesari Aurat. The portrayal of women suffering has been an eternal theme in Indian literature. The role of women in Indian society and the iconic image of the female in India have

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continuously passed through an evolutionary process and literature has always been the principal medium to create and articulate this feminine image. No other woman has enriched the Punjabi literature as Amrita Pritam has. As a writer, all her writings reflect the human predicament, particularly as seen through the eyes of a woman. She has written about the exploited and oppressed sections of the society, mainly women. As a woman writer she was very explicit as a critic of the oppression and of the subjugation of women through patriarchal domination and many obsolete customs that enforce double standards of morality.

Amrita Pritam in her short stories not only depicts women, their different relationships and the dominance of patriarchal practices of the traditional society, but also portrays the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women. The situations women experience are realistically brought out by her. Through her writings she has intoned the long muted voice of the Indian woman seeking human dignity. Amrita Pritam short stories are on different themes. This paper delves upon a glimpse of the inhuman treatment meted out to women in this country. They are on the themes of women's exploitation, suffering, helplessness, adjustment, sacrifice and man-woman relationships. Some of the short stories though they bring out woman's tragedy, they also highlight the coming of a new woman, a woman who wants change and who is not ready to suffer anymore. The women in these stories from rural and urban backgrounds are portrayed as victims of circumstances.

Chhamak Chhallo is a narrative of a juvenile girl selling baskets to eke out a livelihood, who becomes a fatality of a rich man's covetousness. "Chhallo was very dear to Hukamchand. Her real name was Kaushalya but out of affection he abbreviated it to Chhallo" (CC, 105). 'Chhallo' is the name of Kaushalya, adoringly called by her father, a man with affluence and possessions but Partition took over havoc in their existence and they had to voyage to East Punjab. As her father was older Chhallo had to become the bread-winner for the family. The story projects the way the political upheavals and the conscientiousness of running the family fell on women.

Oh, you're uttering evil words all the time. Who knows, with luck today she may be able to sell twenty baskets of four. Oh Chhallo, my dear one, my darling girl, don't let me down today. My honor is at stake. It must be twenty baskets and not one less. And while returning home buy a seer of meat from the meet shop. Go child, it's time for the buses to arrive. And look, don't forget to buy some garlic, onions, green ginger and green chillies. Otherwise your mother will just boil the meet and dump it before me. Hukamchand thought that Chhallo would laugh at his outlandish remark but she kept looking listlessly at her basket. Even if one is inclined to buy a basket her looks put him off (CC 107-108).

Her young step-mother instructed her to become skilled at smiling so that she would be able to magnetize the customers to buy baskets. A smile outlay her so much that it became an excruciating pain forever.

“If only she greeted a customer with a smile he would buy two if he had a mind to buy only one. So many cars pass through this place every day packed with passengers and loaded on top with luggage. Can’t those people afford to buy even two colorful they are. But this girl stands mum before a customer. If only she threw some sweet words at those people when they having a quick cup of tea at the tea stall they wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation of buying a basket....” (CC, 108)

One day she confronted a man in a car ready to buy her baskets but he had no change to pay her. He promised that he would get it at a nearby petrol station. Chhallo faltered but went with him in all her virtuousness, thinking of buying meat for her father with the money earned. Her doom is that she grossed money but mislaid the most precious thing for a woman. As she has to survive for the benefit of the family she has given up the suicide attempt. She has put up such a brave front, and reached home to serve the meat and made them happy.

“The house once again looks prosperous. I tell you on my word, a house where you don’t have the smell of frying meat is no home. Then a cast a loving glance at Chhallo. My Chhallo, my dear one” (CC, 113). The trauma and suffering borne by Chhallo was something that she was unable to share with anybody. It is a dismal fate endured by many women at the hands of selfish, inhuman bestial hankering of men. Thus the viciousness of the social circumstances meted out by women is tinted in this tragic story.

“It was Thursday and so Pooja was not supposed to go to work today....” (TF,109) Thursday Fast is another saga which depicts women’s helplessness. They have to kill their self, conscience, values and morals for the sake of survival. This is the chronicle of a woman who is enforced to take the man’s role and fulfill all obligations of the family. Geeta Srivastava after marriage is forced to take up prostitution for the call of the family. Women are strained into such situation that they find no other option but to go in for the solution that is in front of them. She had wedded Narendra Chaudary, whom she had loved passionately, had also given up college education because of the shortage of money. Both their families had not supported their marriage. The young couple tried rigid to get jobs but in futile. Geeta started flogging vegetables and in the meantime had a son and endurance became more difficult. Geeta left her son at home and went in search of a job as Narendra fell sick. She was given the address of Madame D at the Nepali embassy where she had gone to find a job. Geeta landed up in prostitution at Madame D’s and become Pooja, a new name for a new state of life. Geeta concealed the fact for to her husband, for the benefit of the family that she served at the embassy as he was at a sanatorium. She anticipates leaving her trade soon after cutback the financial requirements. The story portrays how a woman without any education or without a husband hit upon to lead a reverential life for the sake of survival. Another consummate character in the story is a prostitute named Shabnam originally Shakuntala.

Assuming another name doesn't really help. Though I have changed my name to Shabnam, but inside I'm still that very Shakuntala, who, as a child, used to dream of a Dushyant.... Now I've told myself that the way Shakuntala had to live through the day when Dushyant lost his memory of hers; this birth of mine is nothing but an extension of that very day of hers....(TF, 117).

Thursday in a week is a local holiday for their trade. She observes fasting and pooja on the day hoping that the present cursed life would not continue in her next birth. She hopes to find a companion in her next birth. No society, no culture comes to the abet of women when they visage dire situations like Geeta and Shabanam. "Even if you do want to give up profession, don't think of it this year, atleast. This is 1982, when a huge industrial fair is going to take place in this city. The amount you can earn in this year, you can't hope to do even in five years.... At least, try and gather as you can, and then...." (TF, 118). As Shabnam rose to wind up Pooja was so considerate to uttered half-jocularly, "On the day of your fast, you're not supposed to take salt. Don't worry, I'll not add the salt of this world to anything that I offer you" (TF, 119).

In Stench of Kerosene Guleri bring out the saga of women who suffer exploitation because of orthodox patriarchal expectations. Guleri is married to Manak for seven years but had no child.

Guleri always counted the days to the harvest. When autumn breezes cleared the skies of the monsoon clouds she thought of little besides her home in Chamba. She went about her daily chores---fed the cattle, cooked food for her husband's parents and then sat back to work out how long it would be before someone would come for her from her parents' village (SK, 111).

She visited her maternal home once in a year after the harvest. Mother-in-law instigated Manak to re-marry to bare a child. Unwillingly he does it for the cause of mother's wish in begetting a child. As Guleri learns of Manak's second marriage she set fire to her clothes in kerosene and burnt herself. Manak becomes mute with pain and lives like a dead man on losing Guleri. Though a son is born to him he is not excited but felt guilty and said that the baby had the 'stench of kerosene.' The story brings to fore not only the death of a infantile girl, a youthful love, but loss of conviction and unfairness inflicted on a woman. Pain is the most abiding condition of woman's being. Society inflicts disarray in the life of women. Women are expected to fulfill societal obligations of creation and procreation. Being desolate is a blight for a woman. A woman is considered as an empty pod without seed in it if they fail to bear children and she has to be replaced. Guleri and even the new wife are treated as a possession, a commodity, a means to an end. The new wife is married only to bear a son.

His mother encouraged her daughter-in-law to bear with her husband's moods for a few days. As soon as the child was born and placed in his father's lap, she said Manak would change. A son was duly born to Manak's wife; and his mother rejoicing, bathed the boy, dressed him in fine clothes and put him in Manak's lap. He started a long time

uncomprehending, his face as usual, expressionless. Then suddenly the blank eyes filled with sorrow, and Manak began to scream. "Take him away!" he shrieked hysterically. "Take him away! he stinks kerosene" (SK, 115).

The story illustrates that a woman is valued as long she is useful to serve, to bear children and do her duty. Amrita Pritam has projected the brutal aspect of marriage and the way society has little regard for women. She has also portrayed the strong influence of societal-culture that destroys a marriage and young lives.

A Vacant Space is the tale of a woman who gets abducted to be sold but the abductor himself becomes her protector but she suffers the unfulfilled, empty space. The story written during the times of Partition of India and Pakistan brings out the atrocities suffered by women, the way they were made innocent victims. Women become the easy targets to undergo all sorts of injustice, harassment, suffering and exploitation during war crisis and tumult in the nation. The story depicts the life of women who are treated not like human but like cows and sold as a commodity. Mohar Singh had abducted several women on the power of his gun and sold them. Malkiat Kaur captives the heart of Mohar Singh. He takes care her and lends her house, fields, and well. A gypsy woman's status is raised to that of a woman in a home. In spite of leading thirty years of life she was unhappy because she was taken away from her roots. Malkiat Kaur experienced an empty space between her and Mohar Singh, such a vacant space which could never be filled. When she was abducted she was the mother of a year old son and here she lived a life of emptiness by missing her son. Amrita Pritam represents the agony of a mother who suffers separation from her young ones. The vacant space became 'a vast sprawling wilderness within her heart'. The empty space symbolizes the emptiness in the life of a woman, of a mother who is left longing for her flesh and blood. Mohar Singh tried to get her son for her, but the gypsy community had threatened to wreck vengeance on him. Malkiat Kaur's silent suffering has no remedy, a victim of circumstances. One day Mohar Singh dies and there is nothing to keep her there. Her maternal instincts lead her to visualize her son's face in the vacant space. She finds the vacant space, the void to be filled by a picture of her handsome son of thirty-one years. The story brings at the end that she went in search of her son to Pakistan leaving behind her house, fields, well and the vacant space. Whether she would find him or her search would be futile is an unanswered question. Amrita Pritam brings out through the story not only the pitiable state women experience but how women are forced to accept their situation as existential fate. Malkiat Kaur says 'staying as Mohar's woman was better off than being sold as a goat or a sheep' (VS,101). The story brings out the saga of an abducted woman who always felt the misery of missing her son.

Thus Amrita Pritam has brought out the sufferings trauma and the exploitation of women during the crises of partition, war and patriarchy. She has also suffered the same prangs as that of her women characters. She has envisaged herself through

the sufferings of her women characters like Challo, Shubam, Guleri, and Malkait Kaur. Thus, story after story highlight the predicament of women in urban as well as in rural world. Amrita Pritam stories bring forth vivid portrait of woman's encounter with patriarchy and rigid social system. Through these tales of woes she tries to convey that there ought to be an attempt to dispose of the archaic beliefs and thoughts and allow a woman to lead a life of dignity, self-respect and essence. Amrita Pritam's stories stress the fact that women always become the victims to social restrictions and it is high time women fought for their identity.

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